

Churchill's Spencer Ancestry

Of Skeletons in the Cupboard

BY JANET DANIELS
Finest Hour 68

TRACING our ancestors has become a popular pastime, hobby or, in my case, way of life. But no matter who you are, there are bound to be skeletons in the cupboard because our predecessors were not always honourable. Personally I find it adds spice to a family history, but I know there are some who resist digging up the past if they get so much as a whiff of anything unsavoury in their antecedents.

I remember the apocryphal story of one lady who had a pair of duelling pistols as family heirlooms. Yet, when some enthusiastic member of the family started to trace the ancestral tree and found there had been a highwayman in their family, she would have nothing more to do with them.



I make this preamble because Sir Winston Churchill was no

exception. Obviously there were rogues and blackguards in his ancestral past and it is as well to study all aspects of his background to be able to truly assess him for what he was: a great man, yes; perfect, no. It is the complexity of our genes inherited from the beginning of mankind that makes us what we are today, and accounts for the very nature of our being. Thus all Sir Winston's ancestors played a part in fashioning his looks, character, thoughts, etc: each and every one contributed in some way to the make-up of this remarkable man.

Over the decades much has been written of Churchill; his family tree has been pored over by genealogists seeking obscure lines of descent. A recent article on this subject referred to the Medici, Bardi and Guicciardini families in his florentine background (*Genealogists' Magazine* Vol. 21 Nos. 2 & 3), which stem from Lady Frances Vane, wife of the 7th Duke of Marlborough. This article, however, concentrates on the Spencer line.

There does seem to be some doubt about the origins of the early Spencers. The earliest known member of the family would appear to be Sir John Spencer of Wormieghton, Warwickshire who bought Althorp in Northamptonshire, was granted arms in 1504, and died in 1522. He was knighted by Henry VIII and left large estates at Wormleighton and Althorp. He had been very successful in breeding sheep from which he had derived his wealth. It had been widely held that this Sir John was a descendant of Robert le Despenser, Steward to William the Conqueror in the eleventh century, and ancestor of the infamous Hugh le Despenser, Earl of Winchester, friend of King Edward II. Randolph Churchill in Volume I of his father's biography (*Youth 1874-1900* Ch. 1 P. 9) states just that.

However, I was browsing through some Spencer papers at the Society of Genealogists one day and came across a cutting from the *Daily Telegraph* — undated — showing a letter from Patrick W. Montague-Smith, Assistant Editor of *Debretts*, in

which he declared that Churchill's ancestry from Robert le Despenser had been disproved by Dr. J. Horace Round, an early eminent genealogist. Round attributed the Spencer ancestor to be one William Spencer of Radborne, Warwickshire. I cannot find Dr. Round's treatise; neither have I been able to find any evidence that would agree with his theory. It is possible, of course, that William Spencer was himself a descendant of the Despensers, so a word about this family might still not come amiss.

The origin of the surname is interesting. Reaney's *The Origin of English Surnames* gives many examples of surnames derived from offices of state, including those from Norman times. For example, "Butler" (O.Fr.bouteillier) meant the servant in charge of the wine cellar — usually the head servant. Likewise "le Despenser" came from the Old French "despensier" — dispenser (of provisions), a butler or steward. Thus we get Robert le Despenser, Steward to William the Conqueror.

The next sighting of this surname would appear to be Hugh le Despenser, found in the early records as sheriff and custodian of castles between 1224 and 1237. Descendant of Robert? Nobody knows for sure. Neither can we be sure that the Hugh le Despenser entrusted with Hareston Castle in Derbyshire in 1256 was a direct descendant of the other Hugh. But it would not be stretching the bounds of belief to say at least that they were related.

The younger Hugh became Justiciary of England and was killed at the battle of Evesham in 1265, having been summoned to Simon de Montfort's parliament the previous year. By his wife, Alvira, daughter of Sir Philip Basset, a Royalist, he had a son, Hugh, Earl of Winchester. Both this Hugh, known as "the elder" (1262-1326) and his son, Hugh "the younger," were prominent men in Edward II's reign. As the King's favourites, they were powerful, albeit hated.

The Queen, too, hated the Despensers, and because of their hold over her husband she left the country to go to her brother Charles IV in France, vowing not to return until Edward had rid himself of both Hughs. There was talk of war between the two countries at one time and when the King would not bow to her wishes, she gathered an army in France and landed in England in September 1326 with the intention of ridding the country of the two Despensers. The King retreated before her and she had her men marched to Gloucestershire and Bristol in pursuit. Here Hugh the elder was captured and on 27th October was sentenced as a traitor and sent to the gallows outside the town at the age of 64. Incidentally, his head was sent to Winchester!

Hugh the younger accompanied Edward II when he fled before the Queen's army but was eventually captured in Wales where he had retreated to one of his castles. On 24th November 1326 he was brought to trial at Hereford. Found guilty of being a traitor, he was condemned to death. Having been hung, drawn and quartered, his head was sent to London and displayed on London Bridge whilst his quarters were sent to four other towns.

For my own part, I had thought for some time that the Spencer line had come down from the Despensers through the inter-marriage with the Percy, Nevill and Berkeley families. Further research, however, revealed that Edward Nevill, who married Lady Elizabeth Beauchamp (greatgranddaughter of Elizabeth le Despenser and her husband, Maurice Berkeley), was not the ancestor of Robert Spencer, 2nd Earl of Sunderland (of whom more later) as recorded in the Dictionary of National Biography: it was indeed his brother George Nevill, Lord Latimer, who was the Spencer ancestor; he descended from John of Gaunt and this line did, in fact, involve the Nevill and Percy families.

Let me begin with the Spencer line proper. Sir John, mentioned above, married Isabel, the daughter and co-heiress of Walter Grant of Snitterfield. He gained his wealth by enclosing lands

and converting arable land into pasture. With thousands of sheep he was no common shepherd — more a farming entrepreneur.

Their son, Sir William Spencer, obit. 1532, married Susan, daughter of Sir Richard Knightley of Fowsley, Northants. William and Susan's son, Sir John Spencer, who died in 1586, married Katherine, the eldest daughter of Sir Thomas Kitson, a wealthy merchant. This couple had a son, Sir John Spencer (not to be confused with the Lord Mayor of London of the same name) who was knighted in 1588 and died on 9 January 1599/1600; he married Mary, daughter of Sir Robert Catlin, Chief Justice of England.

Robert Spencer, 1st Baron Spencer of Wormleighton, was their only son. He was Sheriff of Northamptonshire in 1601 and reputed to be the wealthiest man in England at the succession of James I. He died on 25 October 1627 and is buried at Brington, Northamptonshire, having married Margaret, daughter of Sir Francis Willoughby of Wallaton, Northants, who died on 17th August 1597. His correspondence and papers can be found in the British Museum as Add.MS. 25079 ff.43-94. Incidentally, I note that he was a subscriber to the Virginia Company.

Robert and Margaret had four sons and three daughters. Their second son, William, was born 1591/2 and succeeded as 2nd Baron; he died 19 December 1636. He was married to Penelope, daughter of Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, who had been politically supported by Robert in the past; she died in 1667. Their son, Henry, 3rd Baron, was born in 1620. He was a bright young man who achieved an M.A. (Oxon) in 1636. A staunch Royalist, he was trusted by Charles I. Created Earl of Sunderland in June 1643 he had little time to hold the title because he was killed at the Battle of Newbury on 20 September that year and buried at Brington, Northants. There is, I believe, a portrait of him at Althorp.

At the age of 19, Henry had married Dorothy Sidney on 20 July 1639 at Penshurst in Kent. She had been born at Sion House, Isleworth, Middlesex on 5 October 1617, died in February 1684 and was buried in the Spencer chapel at Brington church. Waller immortalised her as “Sacharissa” in his poems. She was the daughter of Robert Sidney, 2nd Earl of Leicester and Dorothy, daughter of Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland and Dorothy De~reux (the latter being the widow of Sir John Perrot, ancestor of the author).

The only son and heir of Henry was Robert Spencer, 2nd Earl of Sunderland. Born in Paris on 4 August 1640, he died at Althorp on 28 September 1702 and is also buried at Brington. In 1665 he married the beautiful Lady Anne Digby, youngest daughter of George Digby, 2nd Earl of Bristol and Anne Russell (daughter of Francis Russell, 4th Earl of Bedford). More wealth came their way when Anne inherited all her brother’s estates in 1698.

Robert was a lady-killer and had several mistresses, whilst his wife was little better: she had her gallants. Throughout his career, Robert, known as Sunderland, showed himself to be an intriguer — treacherous, profligate and rapacious. He supported James II whilst maintaining secret meetings with William of Orange. On James’ fall he declared he was a protestant and so, in April 1697, he was made Lord Chamberlain, although he resigned the following December. Sunderland and Anne had three sons and four daughters. One of these sons was the Statesman and Bibliophile, Charles Spencer, 3rd Earl of Sunderland, Whig M.P. for Tiverton. He was born in 1674 and died on 19 April 1722. He held high office under Queen Anne and George I, being prime minister in 1718 until he was ruined by the South Sea Bubble. This man was thrice married: 1) in 1695 to Lady Arabella Cavendish, who died 1698; 2) in January 1700 to Lady Anne Churchill, 2nd daughter of the Duke of Marlborough and Sarah Jennings. (Anne is said to have converted her mother to Whiggism and was her father’s

favourite. Sadly she died at the age of 28 in April 1716); 3) on 5 Dec. 1717, Judith, daughter of Benjamin Tichborne, a very wealthy man. When Charles Spencer died, Judith married Robert Sutton, K.B. and died herself in 1749.

From his second marriage, to Anne Churchill, Charles had issue including Charles Spencer, who succeeded his aunt Henrietta as 3rd Duke of Marlborough, and the Hon. John Spencer (1708-1746), ancestor of Diana, HRH The Princess of Wales. The third Duke was born 22 November 1706 and died, aged 52, of fever at Munster on 20 October

1758. He was a brigadier general and had commanded a brigade at Dettingen in 1743. His wife was Elizabeth Trevor, whom he had married in 1732 and who died in 1761; she was the daughter of Thomas, 2nd Lord Trevor of Bromham, who had been created a peer specifically to assist Parliament get the Treaty of Utrecht onto the books in 1713.

Their son, George Spencer, became the 4th Duke of Marlborough at the age of nineteen. He was born on 26 January 1739 and died at Blenheim on 29 January 1817. During his lifetime he was Ensigny in Coldstream Guards 1755, Captain of 20th Foot 1756, Lord Lieutenant of Oxford 1760, Bearer of Sceptre and Cross at the coronation of George III, Lord Chamberlain 1762 and instituted as a Knight of the Garter in 1771. On 23 August 1762 he married Lady Caroline Russell, daughter of John, 4th Duke of Bedford; she died on 26 November 1811.

We now have a change of surname because their son, George, 5th Duke of Marlborough, took the additional name of Churchill by royal license in 1817. The Churchill surname is interesting in its origin and could perhaps be the subject of another article. Burke's Peerage gives the family origin as coming from Gitto de Leon whose son was Wandril de Leon, Lord of Courcil. The

name then changed from “de Courcil” to “de Chirchil” and ultimately “Churchill”. But I digress.

George was born on 6 March 1766 and died at Blenheim on 5 March 1840, having married in 1791 Susan, 2nd daughter of John Stewart, 7th Earl of Galloway. Lady Soames has written an excellent biography, *The Profligate Duke* (London: Collins 1987).

The 6th Duke of Marlborough became the title of their son, George Spencer Churchill, born 1793 and died 1857. He too married three times. His first wife, Lady Jane Stewart, daughter of the Earl of Galloway, was mother to his son, John Winston Spencer Churchill, 7th Duke; but he later married Charlotte Flower, daughter of Viscount Ashbrook; and then Jane, daughter of the Hon. Edward Stewart.

As I mentioned earlier in this article, the 7th Duke married Frances Vane, daughter of the Marquis of Londonderry. He was born at Garboldisham Hall, Norfolk on 2 June 1822 and died on 5 July 1883 in London. He was married on 12 July 1843 and became Tory MP for Woodstock in 1844, adding the office of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland from 1876 to 1880.

Their third son, Lord Randolph Henry Spencer Churchill, was born on 13 February 1849 at Blenheim and died on 24 January 1895 (the same day that his son Winston was to die seventy years later). This eminent statesman married Jennie, daughter of Leonard Jerome of New York, at the British Embassy in Paris on 15 April 1874. After his death, Jennie married George Cornwallis West in July 1900.

Churchill's descent from John of Gaunt came through the lineage of Dorothy Sidney, wife of Henry Spencer, Earl of Sunderland: her mother was a Percy and her great-grandfather, Henry Percy, 8th Earl of Northumberland, married Catherine

Nevill, daughter of John Nevill, 4th Lord Latimer. The Nevills were descended from Ralph Nevill, Earl of Westmoreland, who married Joan Beaufort, daughter of John of Gaunt and Catherine Swynford. With lines of descent from all of these families it is possible to create more and more charts of Sir Winston's ancestry. Indeed I share many of these lines with him, as do countless thousands of other people.

Have you traced your family tree yet? If not, I suggest you try and see what surprises lay in store for you. Remember that if we all take our ancestral lines back to, say, the era of William the Conqueror, it is inevitable that many shall find they share the same ancestors. After all, there were not that many people living in the Western hemisphere at the time to account for the millions of ancestors needed to sustain all our lines. Never have we owed so much to so few!

DESCENT OF SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL FROM THE SPENCER FAMILY

(Soc. of Genealogists, DNB)

Robert DESPENCER, Steward to William the Conqueror
Ancestor of Despencer family — favourites of Edward II

or William SPENCER of Radborne, Warcs. (Dr. J H Round)

Sir John SPENCER of Wormleighton, Warcs, d. 1522 Granted arms 1504; bought Althorp

= Isabel, d/ch. Walter GRANT of Snitterfield

Sir William SPENCER, ob. 1532

= Susan, d o Sir Richard KNIGHTLEY of Fowsley, Northants.

Sir John SPENCER

Katherine, d o Sir Thomas KITSON

Sir John SPENCER, Kt. 1588, d.1599/1600

= Mary, d o Sir Robert CATLIN

Robert SPENCER, 1st Baron Spencer of Wormleighton only son; d.1627

Sheriff of Northampton 1601.

= Margaret, d. 17 Aug. 1597; d o Sir Francis WILLOUGHBY of Wallaton, Northants.

William SPENCER, 2nd son

(1591/2-1646); succeeded as 2nd Baron

= Penelope, d. 1667; d o Henry WRIOTHESLEY, 3rd Earl of Southampton

John of GAUNT Catherine SWYNFORD Joan BEAUFORT
Ralph NEVILL, Earl of Westmoreland

Richard NEVILL, 2nd Lord Latimer, d. 1530

= Anne, b. 1468; d o Sir Humphrey STAFFORD of Grafton, Worcestershire

John NEVILL, 3rd Lord Latimer, (c1490- 1543)

= 2) Dorothy, d. 1526/7, d o Sir George de VERE

John NEVILL, 4th Lord Latimer, d. 1577

= Lucy, d o Henry SOMERSET, Earl of Worcester

Catherine NEVILL, d. 1596

= Henry PERCY, 8th Earl of Northumberland

Henry PERCY, 9th Earl of Northumberland, KG, d. 1632 =
Dorothy, sister of Earl of Essex and widow of Sir Thomas
PERROT (ancestor of the author)

Lady Dorothy PERCY, d. 1650

= 1616, Robert SIDNEY, 2nd Earl of Leicester

(1595-1677)

Henry SPENCER, 3rd Baron, Earl of Sunderland 1639
Penshurst, Dorothy SIDNEY (1617-1684) (1620-1643)

Robert SPENCER, 2nd Earl of Sunderland (1640-1702)

= 1665 Lady Anne DIGBY, younger d o George DIGBY, 2nd
Earl of Bristol & Anne RUSSELL (d o Francis RUSSELL, 4th
Earl of Bedford)

Charles SPENCER, 3rd Earl of Sunderland (1674-1722)

= 1)1695, Lady Arabella CAVENDISH, d. 1698;

\ 2) 1700, Lady Anne CHURCHILL (1688-1716); 2nd d o Duke
of Marlborough & Sarah JENNINGS 3)1717, Judith, d. 1749; d
o Benjamin TICHBORNE; she mard. 2) Sir Robert SUTTON,
K.B.;

Charles SPENCER, 3rd Duke of Marlborough (1706-1758)

= 1732, Elizabeth TREVOR, d. 1761; d o Thomas, 2nd Lord TREVOR

Hon. John SPENCER (1708-1746)

Ancestor of Diana, Princess of Wales

George SPENCER, 4th Duke of Marlborough 1762, Lady Caroline RUSSELL, d. 181 d o John, 4th Duke of Bedford (1739-1817)

George Spencer CHURCHILL, 5th Duke of Marlborough 791, Susan, 2nd d o John STEWART, 7th Earl of Galloway (1766-1840)

George Spencer CHURCHILL, 6th Duke of Marlborough (1793-1857)

1) Lady Jane STEWART, d o Earl of Galloway.

2) Charlotte, d o Viscount ASHBROOK;

3) Jane, d o Hon. Edward STEWART

John Winston Spencer CHURCHILL, 7th Duke of Marlborough 12 July 1843, Lady Frances Anne Emily, d o Charles William (1822-1883) Vane STEWART, 3rd Marquis of Londonderry Gr-father of Sir Winston Spencer CHURCHILL

Janet Daniels, together with her husband Roy, are active members of ICS United Kingdom, and attended the 1989 Churchill Tour in England and France. They reside in Pinner, Middlesex.

